

First Nations hosting beetle forum

by **GORDON HOEKSTRA**
Citizen staff

B.C. First Nations leaders have organized an emergency forum to deal with the impacts of the mountain pine beetle epidemic spreading across their traditional territories.

The forum in Prince George on Sept. 19 and 20 is being hosted by the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council and the First Nations Leadership Council of B.C., which includes the executives of the First Nations Summit, the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs and the B.C. Assembly of First Nations.

More than 80 First Nations impacted, or potentially impacted, by the epidemic have been invited to the two-day forum at the Civic Centre.

The First Nations will use the forum to come up with a set of principles on dealing with the epidemic, as well as an action plan, Carrier Sekani Tribal Council vice-chief Patrick Michell said Friday.

Michell said the First Nations will be seeking \$100 million in government funding. How exactly the money will be used will be answered at the forum.

But likely it will go towards promoting economic development, and environmental and social health, in First Nations communities and regions, said Michell, chief of the Stelat'en First Nation.

The Stelat'en is one of eight bands west of Prince George that make up the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, which are in the heart of the beetle epidemic in northern B.C.

"This epidemic is an extremely serious crisis," said Michell. "As it runs its course, it will challenge our communities by placing extraordinary pressures on each First Nation's ability to sustain and thrive."

A key issue is what will happen to First Nations communities when the timber supply decreases.

The epidemic — the largest of its kind ever in Canada — is expected to bring an increase in forest-related economic activity in the short term from an increase in the amount of logging allowed, followed by a decrease in employment as a result of a reduction in the timber supply in 10 to 15 years.

Michell explained that while non-native communities will be looking at ways to weather the impacts of the epidemic on their communities' existing economies, First Nations are just starting to build their fragile economies.

It makes their issues unique from municipalities, he added.

Any hits to First Nations developing communities will mean increased unemployment numbers, which are already high, he said.

Michell said the pine beetle epidemic is also an opportunity for the B.C. Liberal government to show how

serious they are about implementing their new relationship, announced by Premier Gordon Campbell in the throne speech after the May 17 election.

The B.C. government has already provided the Cariboo-Chilcotin Beetle Action Committee with \$800,000, which includes the municipalities of Quesnel, Williams Lake and 100 Mile House.

The province is expected to contribute money to a similar-venture being established along the Highway 16 West corridor, which includes Prince George, Vanderhoof and Burns Lake.

The beetles, about the size of a grain of rice, and its larvae destroy lodgepole pine by eating out the inner bark, as well as by introducing a fungus that impedes water flow.

By the time it runs its course in 2013, 80 per cent of the Interior's pine is expected to be dead.